

CONFEDERATION OF LABOR ORGANIZATIONS ESSENTIAL TO LABOR'S PROSPERITY.

BY EUGENE V. DEBS, SECRETARY OF THE BROTHERHOOD OF
LOCOMOTIVE FIREMEN.

THE century in which we live, qualify it by whatever adjective fancy or fact may suggest, is, confessedly, the most illustrious of the Christian era. The proposition is neither novel nor startling. It is so universally admitted as to sound like an ancient aphorism. But when the inquiry is made for the purpose of ascertaining upon what foundations the declaration rests, and what facts can be grouped and marshaled in its support, the field of investigation broadens indefinitely, and the task of those who would respond is onerous, not because facts are few and far between, but rather because of the necessity of selecting from the mass the more salient incidents, movements, discoveries, and achievements, which, when arranged in their order, constitute data which defy criticism.

The space is not at my command for extended illustration, nor am I inclined to enter upon such investigations as would require a volume to do the theme full justice—nevertheless, having accepted an invitation to contribute my views upon the subject of confederation, in its relation to the welfare of labor, certain sharply defined postulates should be stated, because they lead unerringly to conclusions relating to the status of labor.

It has been affirmed by high authority that the present generation knows more than any preceding generation ; necessarily so, since the present generation knows all that former generations knew, and has added indefinitely and immensely to the world's store of knowledge, not only in carrying forward investi-

gations which the past suggested, but in matters and directions which the most advanced of former generations never so much as dreamed of.

It may be prudently affirmed, that the Dark Ages approached the present much nearer than historians suggest; so near, indeed, that no effort is required to point to the land where their dark shadows still linger, constituting a standing rebuke to those who are overboastful of "our Christian civilization"; indeed, it may be said, if ignorance, superstition, bigotry, and many other degenerate human qualities grew abundantly during that period of the world's history, enough remains to create no little humiliation in the ranks of thoughtful men who are now engaged in the work of emancipation. But with such facts in view it may be maintained that the work of evolution and revolution has so far progressed as to inspire the hope of some sort of a millennium in the not distant future.

Christ is credited with having said, "Ye have the poor always with you," and ringing down the centuries has been heard the same doleful and reverberating declaration, and the "poor" have always been found in the ranks of labor. From the day when Lazarus was perishing at the door of the rich man's palace, and the vagabond dogs "licked his sores," the badge of poverty has been worn by the world's toilers; and thousands of their oppressors have not yet "lifted up their eyes in hell," and it is to be hoped, will cease their oppressions before it is too late. Be this as it may, the "signs of the times" foreshadow new departures in national thought betokening a determination to change radically ancient methods of dealing with labor, every one of which, when subjected to the severest analysis, favors the conclusion that new mind forces are in operation, devoted to the solution of what is called the "labor problem."

It is in this regard, more than in any other phase of human affairs, that the century in which we live towers above all other centuries since history was redeemed from fable. Men in Congress are talking learnedly of the "evolution of money" from the time when the "standard" was a "skin," an "ox" or a "sheep," until the world reached the gold or the silver stand-

ard. Darwin and his disciples enter fearlessly the domain of the occult, those realms of the unknown, where the mysteries give full play to conjecture, and tell us that the ancestors of the prehistoric man were the prehistoric monkeys, and the world is all agog with the revelation, but with the nineteenth century dawns an era in which a purpose has been evolved to excavate not only buried Babylons and Troys, but buried truths and principles, which, through all the centuries, since the morning stars sang together, it has been the purpose of the ruling classes to keep entombed.

No one doubts the Herculean character of the task, no one underestimates the mountainous dimensions of the obstacles to be overcome—but there are multiplied thousands who underestimate the tremendous forces in operation to achieve for labor a victory which, when it comes, as come it will, is to baptize the world with an effulgence scarcely less dazzling than if another sun were to be flung into space.

It is not required that writers who discuss the possibilities of labor shall deal in hyperbole. We live in a daring period of the world's history. The impossibilities of yesterday become possibilities to-day, probabilities to-morrow, and accomplished facts the day following. To investigators, nature, however reluctantly, is forever yielding up her secrets. Is it to be presumed that this evolution is to be forever confined to electricity and steam and other forces of nature? Is it to be supposed that in the practical affairs of mankind, the mind is to be forever absorbed by the machine, and that man is to be neglected? Does the hallucination prevail that man, like the silkworm, is forever to "spin his task and die"?—or, like the coral insect, build continents upon which other insects are to bask in eternal sunshine while he is to remain content with the prospective possession of a tomb? Such has been the destiny of labor in the past and such it is now in many autocrat-cursed lands; but it is not true, except to a limited extent, in the United States of America, and that it should exist in any degree where our "star-spangled banner" is supposed to symbolize liberty, is well calculated to revive the exclamation, "Haul down the flaunting

lie," uttered before the slave-pen, block, and lash forever disappeared in the smoke and carnage of war.

Fortunately for the country, and as another evidence of the distinguishing glory of the century, labor is taking high rank in the list of subjects deemed worthy of consideration in arenas where statesmen sit in council. In state legislatures and in Congress it has secured an entrance and a position from which no opposing power can dislodge it. The labor question is in politics as certainly as the silver question or the tariff question, and rightfully so; for it is a question, of not one, but all industries; a question inseparable from farm and mine, forge and factory, the loom, the anvil, and the shuttle, as well as transportation, whether by rail or water craft. It is a building question, a tax and a revenue question, and it is a capital question which, in its sum total, staggers computation.

If the scope of this article permitted figures, they could be piled up upon solid foundations, well calculated to startle statisticians.

The men who create the wealth of the country—at least that portion of them known as "organized workingmen," are profoundly in earnest in discussing their welfare and prerogatives. They do not have to be told that labor has been robbed, degraded, and enslaved. The mouths of the coal mines of the country, even in the absence of tongues, are proclaiming the deep damnation of the organized methods by which the workers in Plutonian pits are robbed and degraded. Impoverished foreigners, by thousands, have been imported to take the places of American workingmen or to reduce them, by processes which bear the stamp of infernalism, to conditions that arouse those fierce premonitions of vengeance which create universal alarm, and against which, in the ranks of organized labor, protests are being made to which it were prudent to listen.

The century is one of vast inventive power, and the "labor-saving machine" multiplies in every branch of industry. Labor contemplates the marvelous expansion of machine-power with a composure born of fealty to citizenship, to law and order, demonstrating intelligence and a comprehension of all the forces

and factors of progress. They observe the two facts, the multiplication of the machine and the steady increase in the army of toilers, the two facts combined constituting a problem, the seriousness of which it would be difficult to overestimate. Practically, every "labor-saving machine" represents a certain number of workingmen added to the hosts of the unemployed. Emigration contributes annually its vast increase to the force, and added to these we have millions of toilers, who must be fed, clothed, and sheltered; who must live as becomes American citizens or sink to the level of the hordes of imported Chinese, Huns, and Poles, who accept degradation without protest, and between whom and the machine there is practically little difference.

Invidious comparisons are always objectionable, but I do not hesitate to say that organized labor in the United States and elsewhere represents in the highest degree the intelligence of labor. In this country it embodies the American idea of government to an extent, all things considered, that will be looked for in vain elsewhere, no matter by what high-sounding title the organization may be known. The declaration invites criticism and is worthy of investigation.

Labor organizations advocate the universal acceptance of eight hours as a legal day's work. The proposition, subjected to the severest tests, is both philanthropic and economic. It proposes employment for the idle and additional rest for mind and body of those who are employed. The proposition is not only philanthropic and economic, but is as eminently social and educational; and viewed from whatever point the investigator may select, forces the conclusion that it is essential to the welfare of labor.

The real question, or that which is the most vital to labor, relates to wages.

It is to be questioned whether, within the entire realm of problems relating to the perpetuity of our institutions, there is one which touches the welfare of the country at so many vital points as that of wages. I am not unmindful of the opinion often expressed that its triteness embarrasses those who would

discuss the labor problem ; but it will be noticed that those who discuss the investment of money evince no timidity in referring to interest, dividends, and rent ; and the fact that these terms have been employed for centuries to do duty for capitalists has won for them no furlough ; and they are still on guard, nor will they be dismissed until sublimating processes of which the world has now no intimation, are introduced to eliminate acquisitiveness, at once a virtue and a vice, from human nature.

I am not an advocate of such a vagary, but do not hesitate to believe that it is largely within the domain of political or governmental evolution, to find a basis for the distribution of the wealth which labor creates, proximately in consonance with justice. Here again the intelligence, the sense of fair dealing, science, and the statesmanship of the century stand pledged to solve the problem. And here the remark may be introduced as worthy of reflection, that the stupendous wrongs which have been inflicted upon labor during the century in the distribution of wealth in defiance of justice and which are still going forward, are operating, paradoxical as it may appear, as a mighty force in correcting the injustice of which labor complains.

The attention, not only of labor organizations, but of trained thinkers, men of vast erudition, political economists, statesmen, who grasp continental questions, is burdened with anxieties relating to labor. They see coming events casting their shadows before ; and they know that the time for dodging and trimming is nearing its end, and that there must be readjustments ; that the few, the exceedingly few, must cease their methods by which, within periods so brief as to bewilder the imagination, fortunes of colossal proportions are amassed, while labor, in ever increasing numbers, is wearing the rag-badger of destitution and squalor. The eulogies of material prosperity, which constitute much of the captivating literature of the period, are to be hushed to silence by the graphic recitals, truthful as they are vivid, of the increasing degradation of thousands because wages do not meet the requirements of the victims of conditions which cannot be contemplated without experiencing the awe produced by the premonitions of earthquakes.

The inability of labor in the past to correct the wrongs to which it has been subjected, need not be commented upon. The world knows the sad story by heart, nor is it required to be boastful, and to assert that even now it is able to overcome the forces in operation to beat it down and hold it in vassalage. This may be said, however, that there was never a time in the history of labor when it was so enlightened, so defiant, and so courageous as now, in these closing years of the century. It is organizing and every lodge is a school and an army post. These schools are educating and sending forth leaders and champions of labor. They are, with many sneers, denounced as agitators, and such they are. They are voices in the wilderness, and they are blazing a new pathway for the hosts of labor. These agitators do not underestimate the forces which oppose them, nor are they unmindful that in the ranks of labor are to be found degenerate creatures, who, while boasting of their independence, are willing to accept stripes and fetters, rather than make sacrifices for their own welfare and the advancement of their fellow-workers. In such things, there is nothing new; simply incidents that have marked all great undertakings—afflictions to be borne by those who carry forward great reforms. Labor, with stoical philosophy, bears its share of such burdens, and moves forward.

Organization is the first step in the emancipation of labor, and that is going forward satisfactorily. It is a prudent estimate to say that three millions of men and women are now marching under the banners of organized labor.

The confederation of these organizations is now, more than at any previous period, enlisting the attention of the individual organizations, and the outlook for such a consummation is cheering.

That confederation is essential to the protection of labor is one of those self-evident truths, which is weakened by introducing proof. The present demands it, but as yet the demonstrations of opposing forces have not been such as to convince all "leaders" of its supreme necessity. It was the "Sumpter gun" that aroused the North from its lethargy, and labor is destined to

listen to decrees which will sweep away objections as the wind scatters straws.

Labor is not unobservant of the fact that capitalists are constantly forming alliances to secure, as they assert, reasonable returns for their investments, and these alliances in numerous instances have been pronounced flagrantly at war with the public welfare; and laws have been enacted to put an end to some of these piratical combinations—notably, the Interstate Commerce law, and still later, the law against trusts.

Was it worth while to enact such legislation, and also to look into the character of the men against whose methods of enrichment the laws are intended to interpose barriers? Such inquiries have placed before the country hidden facts which have aroused universal alarm. It was proved that the purpose of those who controlled vast amounts of money, was to enrich themselves regardless of the rights and welfare of others; that capitalists who usually rank as the highest type of the American citizen, pillars of society and church, distinguished in finance and commerce, the aristocracy of character and those qualities of head and heart which writers and talkers delight to dignify as the hope of the country, organize alliances for the purpose of multiplying their millions by methods which the highest law-making power of the nation condemns by statutes with severe penalties attached. It is such things that have prompted labor to organize for its protection and to resist encroachments upon the dearest rights that ever aroused men to resistance.

Labor is conversant with all the facts relating to the character of the forces against which it is required to contend. It has seen press and pulpit enlisted in the ranks of its enemies. It has experienced in ten thousand ways the dominating power of wealth; and in its investigations for means of retrieval, has decided upon organization, a movement which means vastly more than the enrollment of men in the numerous orders now conspicuously before the country. It means education, study, intellectual equipment for impending struggles to maintain independence and the dignity of American citizenship.

The more advanced members of these labor organizations

believe that the *ultima thule* of organization is confederation. The power which confederation would confer is regarded as indispensable and, as discussion proceeds, obstacles will disappear. The difficulties in the way of confederation are entirely foreign to the question of the necessity of the compact, and relate chiefly to the adjustment of the laws and regulations under which the confederated body would act. In this, I refer more particularly to the organizations of railroad employees.

In taking a broader view of the labor field, it is equally evident that confederation is steadily gaining powerful advocates. I am not disposed to be fanciful; the subject does not invite impractical theories—organization is an admitted power, and confederation multiplies that power indefinitely. In organization the victories and defeats of labor, though by no means balanced, bring to the front the fact that with confederation, labor would be invincible. The dawning of the Christian era was ushered in by the shout, "Peace on earth." Peace has not come, nor can it come, while labor is robbed of its just dues. It is possible to have a peaceful revolution by the *fiat* of the ballot; it is possible to prevent war by being prepared for war; and it is possible to enthrone justice for labor by the confederation of labor organizations.

EUGENE V. DEBS.